

PARENTING ADULT CHILDREN

One of the biggest challenges is parenting adult children. Since our life span has increased, parents have relationships with their adult children for 50 or more years. We often have both positive and negative experiences with our adult children. Karl Pillemer, professor of human development at Cornell University writes, "Parenting is fraught with mixed emotions, thoughts and attitudes. Such ambivalence is apparently universal and a fundamental characteristic of relationships between parents and children." These parent-child relationships involve tense feelings of warmth and affection, as well as anxiety and stress for both generations.

Family dynamics has been changed by the high cost of living, divorce, delayed marriage and parenthood, and new technologies. In the past, parents may have talked with their adult children once or twice a week; now with cell phones and e-mail, they can have a running dialogue.

Parents are facing adult children and grandchildren who often need more than affection. The parenting in the 21st century reflects the economic challenges of our time- job uncertainty, greater debt and more financial temptations. Some adult children ask to move back home; others need help with child care. The research organization, RAND, states that 4 million children live with their grandparents- half of them also have at least one parent living at home, too. Adult children may require temporary support when going through a divorce or experiencing an employment problem. For others, it is not temporary but a permanent approach to life. Susan Morris Shaffer, author of Mom, Can I Move Back in With you, has written that "too many parents become their adult kids' lifestyle subsidizers, bail out specialists and chore-completers." Parents are often faced with the fine line between helping and enabling.

How can we navigate through these years? Start by taking an honest appraisal of your emotional and financial motivation when these issues arise. Wise are the parents who recognize that adult children still need parenting but in a different way. Marilyn Sachs of Ohio State University writes, "Parents and children who manage to survive all the uncertainties and challenges of growing up together, who stay connected while letting go, will experience the richest kind of joy".

If you would like to talk about your relationship with your adult children, call Kathy Laufer, LICSW at 617-796-1663.